SPORT

ROME: AS Roma's Niccolo Pisilli shoots to score during the Europa League match against VfB Stuttgart at the Stadio Olimpico.—Reuters

Pisilli's brace propels Roma past Stuttgart, Villa seal last-16 place

PARIS: AS Roma took a big step towards qualifying for the Europa League last 16 with a 2-0 win over VfB Stuttgart on Thursday, after Aston Villa and Olympique Lyonnais had earlier become the first teams through to the knockout stage with a game to spare.

Jadon Sancho scored his first goal for Aston Villa to lift his new club past Fenerbahce 1-0 while Lyon clinched a last-16 spot with a 1-0 victory over Young Boys in Bern. Freiburg all but joined them by beating Maccabi Tel Aviv by the same score.

Lyon and Villa are level on 18 points with six wins and a loss atop the standings with one game to go the in the league phase. Freiburg are one point behind in third and would have sealed the qualification if Porto hadn't scored a late equaliser against Viktoria Plzen.

Like in the Champions League, the top eight finishers advance automatically after eight rounds to the round of 16 while the teams placed from nine to 24 enter a two-leg play-off to progress.

Nottingham Forest slid to a costly defeat away to Braga, Celtic blew a two-goal lead to draw 2-2 with Bologna and leave their qualification hopes hinging on next week's final round of games as arch-rivals Rangers bowed out despite a first win of the competition.

Roma midfielder Niccolo Pisilli slotted in to give his side the lead shortly before halftime and added another in stoppage time to seal the win — their fourth in a row in the Europa League — and move his side to sixth on 15 points.

Pisilli scored his first goal of the season to break the deadlock in the 40th. Matias Soule's through ball broke through the Stuttgart defence and Pisilli ran onto it before firing high across goalkeeper Alexander Nubel. He crowned his performance with a second goal, finishing off Paulo Dybala's assist into the net to put the game to bed.

Stuttgart started the day in ninth but dropped to 12th. They are two points behind Real Betis, the last team in the direct qualification zone to the last 16.

Villa took the lead in Istanbul in the 25th minute as Sancho steered a precise downward header into the net after a deflected cross from Matty Cash.

The second half brought a flurry of action and Fenerbahce thought they had equalised in the 75th minute when Kerem Akturkoglu found the net, only for it to be disallowed after an offside in the build-up and Villa held on for the win as goalkeeper Marco Bizot produced a string of key saves.

"I'm just happy to get my first goal for Aston Villa and to top it off with that, it's a win," Sancho, who joined on loan from Manchester United in September, told TNT Sports. "Honestly, I know I can do a lot more. I'm very hard on myself in that aspect.

"It's nice to have a manager that backs you and obviously believes in you. Again, every opportunity I get I'm going to try and do 100% and hopefully I can deliver goals more."

Lyon secured their place in the next round with a hard-fought win over Young Boys, as Ainsley Maitland-Niles struck deep into first-half stoppage time in Bern.

A late header from Igor Matanovic gave Freiburg a 1-0 win at home against Maccabi.

Danish side Midtjylland are on the cusp of a last-16 spot despite dropping to fourth place on 16 points after a penalty in the tenth minute of stoppage time from Joachim Soltvedt rescued a 3-3 draw for SK Brann against in a highly entertaining Nordic clash in the Norwegian city of Bergen.

FOREST BEATEN

Braga climbed up to fifth, level on points with Midtjylland, after their 1-0 win left Forest facing the prospect of going into the play-offs.

Morgan Gibbs-White had a penalty saved early in the second half and Braga went straight down the other end and scored as Forest captain Ryan Yates bundled into his own net. To compound Forest's troubles, Elliot Anderson was sent off in stoppage time.

GLASGOW: Rangers' Mohammed Diomande scores during the Europa League match against Ludogorets Razgrad at Ibrox Stadium.—AFP

"Very frustrating. One minute of madness. A game we never looked in trouble," Forest boss Sean Dyche told TNT Sports, with Braga not even managing a single shot on target. "You might come away with a draw, but you shouldn't really lose that game. I don't think they hardly had a real chance, then we had a goalmouth scramble and even that can't go in."

Ferencvaros dropped to seventh after they were held 1-1 by Panathinaikos while Betis' strong run in the competition took a hit as they lost 2-0 at PAOK, where a goal from Andrija Zivkovic and a penalty from Giorgos Giakoumakis secured the Greek side a win.

Betis have 14 points in eighth, the same as ninth-placed Porto, who drew 1-1 with Plzen thanks to substitute Deniz Gul's equaliser in the final minute.

Celtic had to settle for a point at Bologna and sit 24th in the 36-team table, occupying the final play-off berth. The Scottish champions host winless Utrecht in their final game next Thursday.

Martin O'Neill's side got off to a flying start in Bologna with two first-half goals, as Reo Hatate struck early and Auston Trusty doubled the lead before the break. However, between the two goals Hatate was sent off after receiving two yellow cards.

Bologna responded through Thijs Dallinga before Jonathan Rowe brought them level with a goal in the 72nd minute.

"We've given ourselves a chance — that's all, a chance — of qualifying. And from that viewpoint, I'm delighted," said O'Neill. "My own view is that if we had stayed with 11 men, I think we would have won the game."

Rangers were eliminated despite their 1-0 victory over Ludogorets at Ibrox, where Mohamed Diomande grabbed the only goal.

Disturbances in the stands marred many of the evening matches.

In France, tensions escalated between Nice fans and Go Ahead Eagles supporters, prompting security forces to intervene for several minutes before order was restored, with Nice ultimately securing a 3-1 win.

Utrecht's match against Genk experienced a half-hour delay when Dutch police were forced to clear a section of the stadium. Local media reported that visiting Genk fans without tickets had breached the area, prompting the intervention.—Agencies

Shehzad Gul's 7-51 forces Ghani Glass to follow on against SNGPL

KARACHI: The third day of the fifth round of the President's Trophy produced absorbing cricket across venues here on Thursday, highlighted by pacer Shehzad Gul's career-best haul of seven for 51 that forced Ghani Glass to follow on against Sui Northern Gas Pipelines Limited (SNGPL).

At the National Bank Stadium, SNGPL bundled out Ghani Glass for 201, securing a commanding 251-run first-innings lead after the visitors lost eight wickets for 90 runs. Shehzad, who also completed 50 first-class wickets, claimed his fourth five-wicket haul in his last five innings and now has 27 scalps in the tournament.

Resuming on 37-2, Ghani Glass briefly recovered to 111-2 before collapsing to 164-5 and eventually being dismissed. Tayyab Tahir top-scored with 55 off 130 balls, while Saad Nasim struck a brisk 47 off 55 balls. Hammad Butt contributed 33 and opener Kashif Ali made 27. Shahnawaz Dahani supported Shehzad with three for 73.

Enforcing the follow-on, SNGPL struck early as Dahani removed Yahya Abdul Rehman for a duck, but Ghani Glass responded strongly thereafter, reaching 125-1 at stumps, still trailing by 126 runs.

Khawaja Arham led the fightback with a fluent 81 not out off 108 balls, hitting 10 fours and two sixes, while Hammad Butt remained unbeaten on 35 as the pair added an unbroken 119 for the second wicket.

At the UBL Sports Complex, Khan Research Laboratories (KRL) rode a monumental 207-run partnership between Hamza Nazar and Imran Rafiq to take a narrow 20-run first-innings lead over Pakistan Television (PTV). Resuming at 88-4, KRL were dismissed for 434 in 108.5 overs.

Imran struck 170 off 245 balls with 27 fours and a six, registering his seventh first-class century, while Hamza remained unbeaten on 175 off 202 balls, smashing 10 sixes and 14 fours for his maiden first-class hundred.

For PTV, Ali Usman took 5-117, his 11th five-for in first-class cricket.

In reply, PTV stumbled to 27-3 in 7.1 overs, with Mohammad Hamza taking three for five. Shamyl Hussain and Waqar Hussain fell cheaply before nightwatchman Ali Usman was dismissed for a duck.

At the SBP Sports Complex, State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) secured a 60-run first-innings lead over Sahir Associates before reducing them to 44-3 in their second innings at stumps. Mohammad Abbas returned miserly figures of 2-9 from nine overs, while Mohammad Faiq remained unbeaten on 18.

Earlier, SBP were bowled out for 300 after resuming on 73-1, with half-centuries from Abdullah Fazal (76) and Mohammad Ghazi Ghori (67). Razaullah continued his fine form for Sahir, claiming 5-88 following his five-for in the previous round.

At the KCCA Stadium, only 47.1 overs were possible as Oil and Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL) struggled against Wapda. After Wapda were dismissed for 207, gaining a 48-run first-innings lead, OGDCL closed on 117-6 in their second innings, holding a slender 69-run overall lead.

Asif Afridi starred with the ball for OGDCL, taking 5-66, his 19th first-class five-for, while Ali Jawad claimed four wickets. In OGDCL's second innings, Mohammad Asghar picked up 4-35 as the batting side lost five wickets for 63 after a 46-run stand between Haroon Arshad (37) and Sameer Saqib (25). Danish Aziz was unbeaten on 18 when stumps were drawn.—Sports Reporter

Welsford storms to Tour Down Under stage as Vine holds GC lead

ADELAIDE: Powerhouse Australian sprinter Sam Welsford stormed home from well back for his seventh stage win in the Tour Down Under as Jay Vine remained the overall race leader on Friday.

Welsford looked out of contention back in the pack as the dash to the finish line developed in Nairne at the end of the 140.8km third stage.

But Welsford was shepherded to the front by Ineos Grenadiers team-mate Sam Watson before surging clear in the final 100 metres.

"It was so hard, we were in so much trouble at the back, we got swamped, and on that last climb I was on my absolute limit," Welsford said.

"But to have my team-mates with me and believe in me so much after such a hard year to win here on a stage that really suited me, I am over the moon."

Stage one winner Denmark's Tobias Lund Andresen (Decathlon CMA CGM) was second with New Zealand's Lewis Bower (Groupama-FDJ United) third.

Australia's Vine, who had blown away his rivals in Thursday's second stage, continued his grip on the general classification.

Vine leads by six seconds from UAE Team Emirates XRG team-mate and defending champion Jhonatan Narvaez with Switzerland's Mauro Schmid (Team Jayco AlUla) a further 59 seconds behind.

It was a fillip for Welsford after a torrid 2025 with Red Bull Bora Hansgrohe before switching teams to Ineos Grenadiers this season.

Vine, the 2023 Tour Down Under winner, consolidated his overall lead before Saturday's fourth stage which sees two climbs of Willunga Hill.

"The last 50 kilometres was probably more stressful than it needed to be, but I stayed out of trouble, kept it upright and avoided the crash at the finish which was nice," said Vine who was hampered by a pile-up near the finish.

The crash happened within 3km of the end of the stage which meant Vine did not lose any time and kept his leader's ochre jersey.—AFP

Ferrari unveil 2026 car with Hamilton ready for 'massive challenge'

FIORANO: Lewis Hamilton is braced for the "massive challenge" of adapting to the seismic change in technical regulations facing the 2026 Formula One grid as Ferrari unveiled their new car on Friday.

The seven-time world champion and his team-mate Charles Leclerc put the SF-26 through its paces at the Scuderia's Fiorano private test track near their Maranello headquarters.

"It's the biggest regulation shift I think our sport has seen, at least in my time," the 41-year-old Briton said.

"But every single time that it has been a shift into a new regulation, it's been a massive challenge.

"Everyone starts from scratch, so it really levels the playing field. Then it's really all about development, who can develop faster, who comes up with the best ideas, and then a unified team growing at the same pace."

Ferrari team principal Fred Vasseur reflected on "an emotional day" seeing their new creation emerge out of the garage and onto the track.

"It went pretty well, huge amount of work but we are all more than happy, it's not the end of the story but the beginning of the season," he said.

"Let's be positive and enjoy the story." The Frenchman added: "It was good to see the car leave the garage but it's the start of a new journey."

Given all 11 teams are in the same boat, starting from scratch, Vasseur was keen to play down expectations for the season-opener in Australia in early March.

"We'll see the situation in Melbourne, today was a first step," said Vasseur.

"The rate of development will be much higher than years before. We will see about performance in Melbourne, it's too early for expectations."

For the first time in his illustrious career Hamilton failed to even muster a podium finish last term as Ferrari slumped to fourth in the constructors' standings.

They were last crowned constructors' champions in 2008, with Kimi Raikkonen supplying the last of their 15 drivers' titles the year before.

Hamilton has admitted that the last time cars were radically changed in 2022 they did not suit his driving style.

He will be desperately hoping the 2026 reiteration will be more to his taste in the twilight years of his decorated career.

He moved from Mercedes to Ferrari in the hope of securing a record eighth world title — but given his woeful debut year now he will be relieved just to win another race.

There has been a significant change out of the car too, with Hamilton's race engineer Riccardo Adami moving aside to assume another role in the team.

Hamilton, who had forged such a close rapport with his engineer at Mercedes, Pete 'Bobo' Bonnington, and Adami appeared to have a spiky relationship at times during races over the team radio.

The watching Tifosi haven't had much to shout about recently, and Leclerc paid tribute to their fortitude and faith.

"I can only thank them for the huge amount of support we have every single year," said the man from Monaco.

"That definitely pushes us, that motivates us, and that is what makes Ferrari so special. It's thanks to the Tifosi and the support that we have all over the world."

BRITAIN'S Lewis Hamilton drives Ferrari's new Formula 1 car during testing at the Fiorano Circuit on Friday.—Reuters

Coming up is next week's Barcelona shakedown when the new cars will test away from the media, followed by back-to-back tests in Bahrain in February.

The 24-race season gets underway in Australia on March 8.—AFP